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Opening extract from  
**Bone Jack**

Written by  
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# ONE

Stag's Leap. It felt like the edge of the world, nothing beyond it but a fall of rock, depth and fierce winds.

Ash Tyler looked down.

Today the wind was hot, as dry and rough as sandpaper against his skin. It tore back his hair, made his eyes stream. He leaned into it, testing its strength against his own.

There was still a half a metre or so between him and the edge. He inched forward again. The wind slapped his T-shirt around like a sail.

He'd done this before at least a dozen times. Always his best friend Mark's idea. All the crazy things they'd ever done had been Mark's idea.

Except this time.

Here he was again. Alone, and nothing between him and a hundred metre fall onto splintered rock.

He stretched out his arms like wings, the way Mark always used to. He forced himself to look down. The salt taste of sweat on his lips. The wind singing in his ears.

The ground hurtled up towards him and spun away again.

He braced himself against the wind. For a few moments he felt weightless, free, as if he could soar out over the land, ride the air like a hawk. Fly up, pin himself to the sky, watch the blue Earth spin beneath him.

He was giddy with fear and joy.

He knew that the wind had only to draw its breath to snatch him away, send him flailing down onto the rocks far below.

He tipped his weight forward until only the balls of his feet tethered him to the ground.

Then the wind dropped.

He wobbled. Not much but enough to make fear drill through him. If he fell he'd die, bones shattering, skin ripping against granite, blood on stone.

He tensed. Every sinew wire-taut, every muscle straining.

He hung there for what seemed an age. Then the wind gusted hard again, pushed him upright. He took a step back and then another, sagged down onto the good solid ground.

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That had been the closest one yet.

Never again, he told himself. At fifteen, he was too old for these stupid games.

Still trembling from the rush.

Never again.

He rolled onto his back on the parched mountain grass and closed his eyes. The sun was hot on his face. The wind soughed over the mountainside and birds chattered in the gorse. Crickets whirred somewhere close by.

Beyond these tiny sounds stretched a vaster silence. Once it would have been broken by the rough cries of sheep, but there weren't any sheep in the mountains any more. First sickness had weakened them. Then came government men in biohazard suits, the whole area under quarantine, gunshots and terrified bleats shattering the quiet air. Now the sheep were all gone, all dead.

Sometimes Ash imagined he could still smell the stink of blood and burning flesh from the slaughter, the choking disinfectants with which they'd drenched whole farmyards.

The wind dropped again. The air was warm and thick. It clung to his skin like sweat. He sat up, yawned, stretched the tension out of his muscles.

He had a three-mile run home. It was time to get going.

He set off at a steady pace down the path. Soon the rhythms of his body took over. He let his thoughts drift apart and fall away until there was only the beat of his feet, the shunt of his lungs and the hard white sky over raw slopes.

The path ran along a crease in the mountain to a wide flattish shoulder halfway down. Brambles, a collapsed dry-stone wall, and beyond that a cluster of farm buildings where Mark had lived with his family until the bank repossessed it last year.

It had been empty ever since. No one wanted a wind-blasted, run-down hill farm in the aftermath of a foot-and-mouth outbreak.

Ash concentrated on the path. Tried not to look at the farm, not to think about it, not to remember. The memories came anyway, dark and airless. Tom Cullen, Mark's dad, up to his neck in debt, silently watching the carcasses of his slaughtered sheep smoulder in huge pits. His world falling apart.

'We should have seen it coming,' Ash's mum had said afterwards. Eyes full of tears and anger. 'We should have done something.'

But no one had done anything for Tom Cullen.

A battered FOR SALE sign hung on the gate. Beyond it was the yard, an expanse of cracked concrete edged with

tall weeds and nettles. The farmhouse windows were boarded up. Around it stood several outbuildings, a rusted tractor resting on its wheel rims, a few empty oil drums.

The old barn, its doors hanging on their hinges, its roof sagging.

When they were kids, he and Mark had bottle-fed lambs in that barn. Turned the hayloft into a den. Once they'd cornered a marauding fox in there, then, awed by its fierce wildness, stepped back and let it run free into the night.

And in that barn, in the dead of night, Tom Cullen had knotted a rope into a noose, slung it over a beam and—

Ash wouldn't let himself think about that.

Not that.

He ran on and didn't look back. Where the path forked, he took the steeper route, a sharp zigzag downhill between high banks of boulder and gorse.

He came around the shoulder of the mountain and the land opened out before him, greens and greys and purples slashed with fox-red bracken. A wild terrain of deep wide valleys, rough moors, crags.

He liked this route, even though it took him past the Cullen farm. When Dad came home – any day now – they'd come running out here together. They'd camp at one of the mountain lakes, go canoeing and fishing and

rock climbing. They'd worked it all out in emails and phone calls.

But lately Dad hadn't been answering his emails or his phone and now he was two days late coming home. Mum was worried. She never said so but Ash knew it and so he worried too. The house phone seemed to ring on and off all day but the callers were never Dad.

'Where the hell are you?' he said out loud to the mountains and the sky. 'Come home, you stupid bastard.'

He ran faster. Only two weeks now until the big race, the annual Stag Chase through the mountains. He'd be the stag boy, the lead runner chased by other boys. And Dad would be back by then. He'd be there. Ash would win. He knew in his heart he would. He was rubbish at most sport but he could run like a stag, run like the wild wind. He'd win and Dad would be waiting at the finish line, brimful with pride.

The whole thing played out like a movie in his mind.

He lengthened his stride, let his body do the thinking, let it make the split-second decisions about footfall and rock and root. Ran through thorn and gorse, over slope, stone, ridged mud, slippery patches of wiry grass. The whisper of the breeze, the scrape and scuttle of loose stones underfoot. A kestrel trembling on the high thermals. The burnt smell of the sun-scorched land.



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A bird shot out of the bracken, flew straight at his face. A gaping beak the colour of steel, ragged black wings, claws ripping at his skin. He flung out his hands, felt feather and bone under his fingers. He staggered, lost his footing and crashed down onto a scratchy mattress of heather.

Then the bird was gone. He rolled onto his back and lay there, breathing hard, heart thumping, staring wide-eyed at a darkening sky.

## TWO

A few seconds ago the sky had been as pale as the white sun, but now bruised-looking clouds were piling up on each other, a dark avalanche rolling over the land. Still lying on his back, Ash watched it warily. The weather in the mountains could change in the blink of an eye. Last year he'd got caught in a brief, ferocious hailstorm that had come out of nowhere on a clear spring day.

Now it looked as if a rainstorm was going to catch him.

And a tremor in the mountainside, a long low vibration like a roll of thunder except that it couldn't be because it didn't stop, just got louder and closer until the bone-dry ground and the air thrummed with it.

Something coming, something powerful and fast. Not just one thing but many, feet pounding the hard earth; animals or people, Ash couldn't tell which.

Whatever they were, they were coming uphill towards him.

Ash scrambled to his feet, looked around. Nothing. But there was still something coming, the pounding getting louder, closer. He backed away from the path into dense gorse that tore at his bare legs. He couldn't run through that, couldn't get any further away from the path.

He looked for somewhere to hide, but now a stone skittered at the bend below. Behind it came a running boy. He was about Ash's age – fifteen, maybe sixteen – and he was tall and lean like Ash too, wearing rough brown leggings and thin leather boots like some ancient-days character from a movie or a computer game. In the heat haze he seemed spectral and unearthly, a strange shimmering apparition. His hair was sculpted into spikes stiffened with pale mud or clay. More clay caked his face, made a cracked and peeling mask. Above the waist he was naked except for a crude design daubed on his chest, a blood-red stag's head with branching antlers. He stumbled as he ran, lurched and flailed, staggered onwards again. His eyes were wide with terror. His clay face stretched into a silent scream.

The boy was exhausted. Ash could see that straight away. Beyond exhausted. Legs heavy. His head bobbing, breathing in quick wheezy gasps.

But he kept running.

Like he was running for his life.

His gaze met Ash's as he passed but he didn't stop, didn't break his stumbling stride.

Still there was the rumble in the mountainside, stronger now. Ash crouched down low, waited with his breath catching in his throat, hoped whatever was coming up the path wouldn't notice him hiding amidst the bracken and spiky clumps of gorse.

The boy was out of sight now.

Time crawled.

Then more boys appeared further down the mountain. First three or four, then dozens of them streaming into view. As with the first boy, there was something unearthly about them, as if they were tricks of the light rather than flesh and blood. Like him, they wore leggings, masks, thin leather boots strapped at the ankle. But their masks weren't clay. Theirs were ragged things of painted, stiffened sackcloth, masks with eyeholes slashed into them and gaping mouths. Their pace was steady and relentless. They looked as if they could run all day. Soon they'd catch up with the fleeing boy and his race would be over.

Ash knew what they were. Their costumes were wrong, but these were hound boys and this was a Stag

Chase. Except it couldn't be. The Stag Chase was only held once a year and it wasn't for another two weeks and then Ash was going to be the stag boy fleeing the hounds. Not this clay-daubed stranger.

The runners passed Ash as if he wasn't there: ten, twenty, thirty and more of them.

A pack of hounds, running its prey to ground.

The stag boy didn't stand a chance. They'd catch up with him on the ridge, perhaps even sooner.

Ash tensed, about to jump up and help him. Then he stopped. Their unearthliness unnerved him and there were too many of them anyway. And already they were almost out of sight, only the stragglers still visible as the path jackknifed its way up the mountain.

Then the last of them was gone.

Ash stood still, heart hammering, watching the spot where they'd vanished.

A shriek ripped through the silence. Part human, part animal.

The stag boy. It had to be. The hounds must have caught up with him by Stag's Leap.

The blood drained from Ash's face.

Something terrible was happening. He knew it in his bones, as surely as he knew night from day. No one screamed like that except from raw terror. This wasn't

just a race. This was dark, savage, murderous. A hunt, with the stag boy as its prey.

He went back to the path, ran a little way along it then scrambled up onto a swell of higher ground to get a better view. He shielded his eyes against the sun and scanned the upper slopes for the boy and the hounds.

They couldn't have got further than that. There hadn't been enough time.

There was no sign of them. Not a sound, not a movement.

They'd gone.

It was as if they'd never been there at all.

The storm clouds had vanished too, sucked back over the horizon. Instead there was the glaring white metal sky again, so bright it hurt his eyes.

A tiny movement further up the mountainside caught his attention. He shielded his eyes and squinted into the sunlight.

There was a girl standing on a boulder, watching him. Her hair was dark and wild. She wore a dress the dusty red of roadside poppies. He recognised her straight away: Callie Cullen, Mark's younger sister.

Relief flooded through him at the sight of someone familiar. Suddenly everything seemed ordinary again.

The impossible Stag Chase gone, the world settling back to its sensible self.

It struck him that Callie must have seen the running boys too, must have seen where they went.

‘Callie!’ he hollered. ‘Hey, Callie! Did you see those runners? Where did they go?’

If she heard him, she didn’t answer. She just stood there, watching him, motionless except for the breeze tugging at her dress and hair.

Ash shrugged his shoulders, gave up. Everything that had happened this morning was too weird for him. All he wanted now was to be back at home, in his own room where things made sense and he could shut the door, lose himself in a computer game, keep the world at arm’s length. And soon Dad would be home, maybe even today, and everything would be OK.

Nothing else mattered.

He set off at an unsteady trot, still shaky with adrenalin. His legs sloshed around as if they were full of water.

Heat shimmered on the mountainside, split the air, played tricks on his eyes. Faraway things seemed close, close things seemed further than they really were. And shadows raced alongside him, like the shadows of scudding clouds. Except there weren’t any clouds, not

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any more, just the white-hot sky stretching from horizon to horizon.

The shadows spooked him. He didn't look back. Instead he ran harder, faster, and he didn't stop until he reached home.